Success in Counterinsurgencies

Depends on Clear and Achievable Political Objectives

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to

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Introduction

To succeed as an archer, one needs a clearly defined, well-observed target within range. If it is camouflaged, not present or out of reach, it is futile to shoot. The archer could be highly trained, have the best equipment, and strong motivation, but he will waste all his arrows; he needs a target in order to succeed. This short analogy can be applied to any war, even a counterinsurgency.

In classic military theory there are three requirements for victory: A clear and achievable objective, a good strategy, and the necessary means to conduct war. The objective, i.e. what one wants to achieve with the war, dictates the other two. Therefore, setting a clear and attainable political objective is the most important condition for success in counterinsurgencies because it is what the strategy is designed to achieve and is the measure of success.

Background: Defining Wars of Insurgency

War is a clash of wills between two or more groups, conducted in a pursuit of a political end. Its central feature is the use or the threat of organized violence.[1] The nature of war is constant with violence, disorder, uncertainty and friction. At the same time, the character of war is ever changing: Each skirmish, each battle

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[1] MCDP 1-1: *Strategy* (Department of the Navy, Headquarters United States Marine Corps: Washington, D.C., 1997), p.16

and each war is unique.[2] In wars of insurgency, two subcategories are recognized:

> *Insurgency* is a type of war conducted with the aim of overthrowing an established government, occupying power or other political authority, and replacing it with insurgent control.[3] It can take on all sorts of characteristics from non-violent opposition to civil war.[4]

> *Counterinsurgency* is the means to counter an insurgency. Its aim is to establish or maintain the rule of law, defend the political regime, and thereby defeating the insurgents.[5] It is conducted with military, paramilitary, economic, psychological, and civic means.[6]

Defining Success in Counterinsurgencies

The decision to go to war is among the most serious decisions for any state or political entity. It can lead to ruin or it can lead to success. According to *MCDP 1-1, Strategy*, only two fundamental national strategic goals exists. The first is survival, and the other is victory. The first is about an entity's ability to

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[2] MCDP 1: *Warfighting* (Department of the Navy, Headquarters United States Marine Corps: Washington, D.C., 1997) chapter 1.
[3] The U.S. Army and Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 2
[4] David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International, 2006), p. 43
[5] Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare,* pp. 61-63
[6] *Counterinsurgency Field Manual,* p.2

continue as before the war, and the second relates to the
articulated political aim.[7]

Counterinsurgency is nothing but war, and thus follows the
logic of classic strategy. The nature of war is just as dominant as
in every other war. Its result is difficult to predict, but the
counterinsurgent's desired endstate is presumably to achieve a
better peace than what existed before the war. The character of the
counterinsurgency can vary. Still it is a war, and thus is a subject
for strategy. The means and ways have to be chosen to match the
ends.

Unclear and shifting objectives creating pressure to end war

For democratic countries, the population chooses the political
leaders, who run the nation's policy. Sometimes the policy requires
the government to wage war. For defensive purpose war is hardly an
object for disagreement, but for offensive purposes the opinion and
thus the support varies. The opinion and the support change quickly
based on whatever situation that occurs.

In the seventies, a growing opposition led to the US withdrawal
from Vietnam. People no longer understood the cause or the final
political outcome, and the sacrifices were regarded as too high. The
same mechanism came to play during the incidents in Somalia in the

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[7] MCDP 1-1: *Strategy,* p.42

early nineties. Nurtured by the success in the war against Iraq, and the emergence of a "new world order"[8] a force under the mandate of the United Nations experienced a painful lesson.

In 1992 Somalia was a country in civil war with a suffering population. The UN intervened to monitor a cease-fire and to secure the humanitarian work. The mandate and the objectives changed, however, several times. From securing humanitarian aid, the objective became to clearing the city of Mogadishu of arms and armed gangs. It further evolved to seizing the mightiest clan leader, Mohammad Farrah Aideed, and by the end of the operation, it even included rebuilding the state of Somalia.[9]

These objectives became an enormous challenge for the US-led military coalition. The forces were not equipped, trained, or scaled for such operations. Neither the American population nor its politicians were prepared for heavy fighting and casualties. According to the former US ambassador to the UN, Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, the mission was not authorized by Congress and did not relate to the US national interest.[10] Subsequently, the forces had to withdraw, leaving the country doomed for decades.[11]

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[8] The term "new world order" stems from the first Bush administration and indicates a post Cold War special responsibility for the United States to control violence, aggression, and war and to create peace through international organizations and alliances, especially the United Nations.
[9] Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, *Making War to Keep Peace* (New York, USA: Harper Collins, 2007), p.100
[10] Kirkpatrick, *Making War to Keep Peace,* p.106
[11] Kirkpatrick, *Making War to Keep Peace,* pp. 83-100

First Counterargument: Objectives in counterinsurgencies must

develop as the operations go forwards

Wars of insurgencies are complex and often protracted.[12] Many argue that the desired outcome must change several times, because certain actions create new possibilities. This is referred to as a "window of opportunity". For this reason, some experts say a clear political objective cannot last throughout a war. War develops and is fundamentally unpredictable, wrapped in "the fog of war" webbed together by political, religious, and historical reasons. *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* describes this reality:

> In an ideal world, the commander of military forces
> engaged in COIN operations would enjoy clear and well-
> defined goals for the campaign from the very beginning.
> However, the reality is that many goals emerge only as
> the campaign develops […] Often, the best choice is to
> create iterative solutions to better understand the
> problem.[13]

Response to the First Counterargument: Tempting and

Opportunistic Objectives

As the example above implies, some opportunities need to be seized, but the desire for more is often an enemy to success. Opportunistic leaders find new possibilities in every circumstance, and in doing so forget the origin of the war. Clausewitz describes

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[12] Often insurgents are the weaker part and use time as a means to gather support and strength for a transition into more "regular" warfare. See Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, p. 6 and Bard O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse* (Washington D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc. 2005), p. 49-55
[13] *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, p. 147

this phenomenon as a magnet suspending between the three objects of emotions, chance, and policy, represented by the people, commanders and the government.[14] They all bring personal interest to war and thus influence its conduct and evidentially the outcome.

For leaders as Alexander the Great, Napoleon, and Hitler little was never enough. For every new country conquered, a new one appeared in sight. Today's democracies moderate this desire, but the power of wanting more could also be seen in modern times. The 1991 Gulf War - even if not a counterinsurgency per se - is highly interesting. In a matter of days and weeks, the US led coalition accomplished the clearly articulated objectives of liberating Kuwait, preventing Iraq from invading Saudi Arabia, and keeping the Persian Gulf open.[15]

Many criticized the President of the United States afterwards. Even his own coalition commander, General Schwarzkopf, recommended moving on to destroy Iraq's army once and for all in a battle of annihilation.[16] It was a classic "window of opportunity" to be exploited, he said. The President stood firm and stuck to his original objectives, and conducted one of the most impressive victories in history.[17]

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[14] Clausewitz, *On War*. P. 101
[15] Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought* (London, UK: Frank Cass Publishers, 2006), p. 12
[16] Kirkpatrick, p.41
[17] To understand the concept of *winning* in war, one needs to look not at the enemy but at the objective. See Thibauld's introduction in *The Art and Practice of Military Strategy*, p.1-5

Second counterargument: The challenge of gaining popular support

True objectives must be *achievable* and *measurable,* but in war they often are not.[18] The biggest reason can be found in the population. It will hesitate to support an unclear and shifting objective, but it will also hesitate to support clear objectives if they are too violent, and too much is at stake for too little gain.

In order to gain support for the war, politicians sometimes modify the goal, or even sometimes camouflage it. A "humane" justified objective will gather more support and more often accept the required sacrifice it takes.[19] There is a catch, though; often the true reason for war is discovered behind the camouflage.

Response to second counterargument: Looking at Israel's history

The history of Israel shows how powerful a justified and clear political objective can be, and what happens if it is not. Ever since the state of Israel was established, it has run an aggressive and offensive policy. The 1948 War of Independence, 1956 Sinai Campaign, 1967 Six-day War, and the 1973 Yom Kippur War showed the power of a nation in a war with the ultimate existential political objective – survival.

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[18] Thibauld (ed.), *The Art and Practice of Military Strategy*, p. 3
[19] MCDP 1-1, *Strategy*, p. 93

In the mid-seventies, new politics, organization, leaders, and policy appeared.[20] The offensive approach reached a culminating point in regard to what measures Israel could take and still gain national and international support. After a period of increasing terrorist activity, Israel launched Operation "Peace for Galilee" on 6 June 1982. The official political objective was to overrun PLO[21] strongholds and to push the terrorist organisation 25 miles from the border in order to prevent rocket and mortar attacks on Israel.[22]

It soon became clear that the aim was higher. The IDF[23] rushed six and a half divisions[24] straight to Beirut and the Beirut-Damascus road. This was more than twice as far as the articulated objective, and the first time a Muslim capital was occupied by Israel.

The war created the biggest political challenge in Israel's history. Opposed to the previous wars, "Peace for Galilee" was launched without consensus. Many people did not feel "Peace for Galilee" was as essential to survival as the previous wars.[25]

The most likely *real* political aim was to draw the Syrians into a fight, in order to remove them by force from the Beqaa Valley, and to reduce or eliminate Syrian influence in Lebanon. The Prime Minister Begin and Minister of Defense Ariel Sharon knew they would

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[20] Martin Van Creveld, *The Sword and the Olive: A Critical History of the Israeli Defense Force* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2002), p. 250
[21] Palestine Liberation Organization
[22] Van Creveld, *The Sword and the Olive*, p. 289
[23] Israeli Defense Force
[24] This force was about twice as large as in the 1973 Yom Kippur War.
[25] http://countrystudies.us/israel/33.htm, (viewed December 16, 2007, 21.49)

not get support for this, so the objective was adjusted for popular support.

This highlights the challenges of popular support for war. It is a nasty business and often people do not like its immediate result. It can be tempting to try to justify the violence with an ideological purpose, and good intent, but that will not necessarily result in success.

Looking at the ambivalent example of Iraq

The ongoing war in Iraq is an example of an impressive success with a clear achievable political objective, but it also reflects the problem of an unattainable one. In her book, *Making War to Keep Peace*, Kirkpatrick describes this as "the twin goals of our foreign strategy."[26] The first goal was to ensure the safety of Americans by eliminating an imminent threat, and the second was to spread democracy and free trade. The first goal is clear and measurable, and the potential Iraqi threat to American soil was removed within months, achieved by an overwhelmingly successful campaign. The second goal is vague and causes greater problems. Because views on what democracy is are endless, as well as on how to measure success, and determine when victory is achieved.

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[26] Kirkpatrick, *Making War to Keep Peace,* p.279

Conclusion

    War is a serious matter for all participants. Counterinsurgency is a type of war that can take many characters and forms. Its overall purpose is to maintain status and rule of law for the existing power. Political objectives in counterinsurgencies vary greatly from situation to situation. Nevertheless, even with an inherent overall purpose, a need exists for clear and achievable political objectives. First, for the purpose of tailoring the strategy and the means to match the objective; second, for deciding when victory is achieved and the war ended; and third, for acting as a guide for future actions and in particular as a "firewall" for temptations that might occur during the war. If the political objective is not clear and achievable, counterinsurgency can take its own life, experience several changes in objectives and move away from the original cause.

1908 words

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